

Rupert Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion: Freeing The Spirit Of Enquiry*, London, Coronet, 2012, pp. 392. ISBN 978-1-444-72792-0 (Hardback).*

Rupert Sheldrake is a biologist, author, and an ambassador for a more holistic science. His previous publications include *A New Science of Life* (1981), *The Presence of the Past* (1988), *Seven Experiments That Could Change The World* (1994), *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home* (1999), and *The Sense of Being Stared At* (2003), amongst others. Most of these books build on Sheldrake's hypothesis of morphic resonance that is described in his first two books. *The Science Delusion* (2012) can be understood as a response to Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* (2006).

Sheldrake begins by establishing his own impressive scientific credentials. I was pleasantly surprised to find that he did some of the initial work on 'programmed cell death' or *apoptosis*. This is the mechanism inherent in cells that causes them to 'commit suicide' by breaking themselves down. It is a natural process that prevents runaway cell growth. My own final year project at university also investigated apoptosis and how this response could be triggered by a light-activated drug to destroy cancer cells. After establishing his scientific C.V. Sheldrake summarises what he sees as the ten dogmas of materialism. Briefly, these dogmas are that: nature is mechanical, matter and energy are conserved, nature's laws are fixed, matter is unconscious, nature is purposeless, all biological inheritance is material, memories are physical traces in brains, minds are confined to brains, and that psychic phenomena are illusory. He then goes on to dedicate a chapter to the discussion of each of these dogmas in turn. Each chapter is well structured and presents the history of the topic, arguments and evidence *contra* the dogma, questions for materialists, and a concise summary.

The Science Delusion does not directly engage with Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006). Dawkins was specifically interested in testing the 'God Hypothesis', and in arguing against it based on his understanding of science. Other writers have engaged more directly with Dawkins' arguments set out in *The God Delusion* (see McGrath & McGrath, 2007; Ward, 2008). Surprisingly, Dawkins' did not claim to be an atheist but an agnostic who leans toward 'strong atheism', in theory perhaps making him less dogmatic than he seems in practice. What *The Science Delusion* does make clear, and where it is in opposition to *The God Delusion*, is in the world of difference between Dawkins' paradigm and Sheldrake's. The former is often labelled 'reductionist' or 'materialist', whereas the latter is often referred to as 'holistic' or 'non-materialist' in direct contrast. Indeed, both authors seem to be arguing for their own particular paradigm.

In contrasting Dawkins and Sheldrake, the latter seems to be much more of a diplomat than Dawkins. Sheldrake does not personally denigrate his opponents but presents his arguments and evidence calmly and rationally. Personally, I agree with Dawkins that the 'God Hypothesis', as he presents it, seems unlikely, although I also think his argument contains many faults. I am, therefore, a more middle-of-the road agnostic and acknowledge that my conclusions are very much dependent on my own worldview. Unfortunately, Dawkins can't seem to resist making ad-hominem attacks,

* Published in *De Numine*, No. 57, Autumn, 2014, 39-41.

such as calling some religious believers 'dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads'. Happily, Sheldrake is much more of a gentleman in this respect. However, this does not necessarily mean that Sheldrake's arguments are correct, and they can be challenged in a number of ways. The greatest problem I have with the hypothesis of morphic resonance is that it seems to be another subtle dualist position, which is what Sheldrake is striving to avoid. How does the brain interact with the hypothesised morphic field? He uses the analogy of a television set to explain how the brain does not produce the mind or memories, but rather how it tunes in to a field instead. I find this analogy somewhat misleading. Firstly, we already know the mechanism of how a television works in order to receive transmitted signals. The same cannot be said for the brain and a hypothetical mind-field. Secondly, the nature of the electromagnetic field can be functionally described using mathematical models, whereas the morphic field cannot. Thirdly, we can construct devices to detect and manipulate the electromagnetic field based on our mathematical and theoretical understanding of it, this has not yet been demonstrated for the morphic field. Nevertheless, Sheldrake does raise intriguing questions about mysterious phenomena that do require an explanation, such as animals who sense when their owners are coming home, telephone telepathy, Near-Death Experiences, the sense of being stared at, and inedia. In *The Science Delusion* Sheldrake discusses several scientific studies of his hypothesis, but unfortunately he does not respond to studies by other scientists that have failed to replicate his results, such as Colwell et al. (2000), and Wiseman et al. (1998). Replication, as I suspect Sheldrake would agree, is one of the most important elements of the scientific method.

Sheldrake identifies ten dogmas of the materialistic paradigm. However, these can all be inverted to identify ten dogmas of a non-materialistic paradigm. This appears to be the flip-side of Sheldrake's argument. We find that these dogmas are, that: nature is more like a nested hierarchy with irreducible properties at each level, energy and matter are constantly created, nature has habits rather than laws, matter is ensouled, evolution is teleological, memory is collective, memories are non-physical, minds extend through time and space, and that psi phenomena are real. Sheldrake makes no attempt to disguise the fact that these dogmas have their historical roots in ancient Greek, Mediaeval, and Renaissance concepts of nature. Rather he seems to be encouraging a return to them, in alliance with the explanatory power and methods of modern science.

Personally, I would have liked Sheldrake to concentrate more on the question of conflicting paradigms, rather than also using this book as an opportunity to re-present morphic resonance. My own view is that whilst *some* people do indeed subscribe to one or the other poles of the 'reductionist/holist' divide, this debate is largely irrelevant to the way *most* people, including the majority of scientists (who, believe it or not, are also people), actually live their daily lives. Even within science there are examples of people who are trying to make progress without falling into this stereotypical 'us' versus 'them' trap. Perpetuating this stereotype may well cause more harm than good as we strive to understand our world and our place within it. By depicting science as a religious creed that people subscribe to I fear that Sheldrake is inadvertently continuing this unhelpful stereotype. Science itself is not a religion or way of life, it is a set of methods and an ever-changing body of knowledge. Having said that, I think that Sheldrake belongs to a growing body of scientists that do take a more inclusive or holistic approach to the study of the world. He is in the

uncomfortable position of trying to raise awareness of an outdated materialist paradigm whilst, at the same time, representative of a science that has moved beyond the intellectual restrictions of physicalism and behaviourism. Science, as Sheldrake sees it, and as I see it, can no longer be equated with materialism in its strict, historical sense. Although personally, judging by the plethora of accounts in the RERC archives, I doubt that the majority of people have ever really subscribed to strict materialism in the first place.

I agree with Sheldrake's overall aim to free the spirit of enquiry and that allegedly 'fringe' areas should be subject to scientific examination without prejudice. However, as Sheldrake recognises, this of course raises practical and ethical questions. There are only a limited amount of resources and these have to be allocated on the perceived, expected, or likely benefits of any research. Is it ethical to invest in experiments to test whether dogs know when their owners are coming home when we desperately need cures for diseases such as AIDS, cancer, or Alzheimer's?

The Science Delusion is certainly a stimulating and thought-provoking book. Although not directly countering Dawkins, as the title might suggest, it does encourage us to examine our own paradigms and ask how they may be limiting or restricting us. Or indeed, whether we sometimes actually need such opposing paradigms to define ourselves, and who we are, within whichever worldview we adopt. Only by recognising this can we then make an informed choice about which world to live within and work to transcend our differences.

References

- Colwell, J. et al. (2000). The Ability To Detect Unseen Staring: A Literature Review And Empirical Tests, *British Journal of Psychology*, 91, 1, 71-85.
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God Delusion*, London: Bantam Press.
- McGrath, A. (2007). *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine*, London: SPCK.
- Ward, K. (2008). *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God*, Oxford: Lion.
- Wiseman, R. et al. (1998). Can Animals Detect When Their Owners Are Returning Home? An Experimental Test Of The 'Psychic Pet' Phenomenon, *British Journal of Psychology*, 89, 3, 353-529.

Reviewed by Michael J. Rush

E-mail: mikerush@virginmedia.com

Website: www.esoteric-experience.org.uk